

The Post - Marcos Era
An Appraisal

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All sectors of the population are anxiously inquiring and speculating on the state of the presidential health. Rumors abound and predictions are rife, leading to endless guesses about what is to happen in a post-Marcos era. A post-Marcos era is certainly coming. Aside from the immediate factor of Mr. Marcos' supposed "influenza" requiring what Malacañang calls a "reverse isolation," there are two other factors that have forced Filipinos in greater and greater numbers to think that a post-Marcos period may be imminent.

First is the economic crisis which has now pushed 70% of Filipino families below the poverty line, has shocked everyone with the hugeness of the foreign debt, and has diminished the government's credibility to the vanishing point. Second is the great number of Filipinos actively and visibly opposed to the regime as shown in the last elections and in demonstrations and other political actions all over the country. The latest blow to the administration is the report of the Agrava Board which concluded that the Aquino assassination was a military conspiracy involving not only the military escorts of former Senator Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. but also, three generals, including the Chief of Staff himself.

What will be the configurations of the post Marcos era?

Many view the post-Marcos era first in terms of the physical absence of Marcos from the political scene and second, in terms of a fundamental change of policies. Most Filipinos I think, emphasize the first; fewer, but a growing number, are beginning to think in terms of effecting basic changes although there is still no broad consensus on the direction of change. Some even regard change simply as a return to a pre-Marcos status quo.

SAME DOG, DIFFERENT COLLAR

In my opinion, the post-Marcos era will be characterized by the same policies and programs and they will be implemented by the same breed of technocrats but behind a facade of democracy. In this sense, the post-

Marcos era will be essentially the same as the Marcos one, only with a new set of actors and with just enough cosmetic changes to barely accommodate present popular dissent and beguile a majority of the citizenry.

I apologize if I have dashed the hopes of those of you who think they have seen the light of a new future at the end of a long, dark tunnel. Above all, it is not my intention to dampen the admirable zeal of millions of Filipinos who are now participating in so many protest activities. I wish only to offer what I think is a realistic assessment of the present alignment of political forces so that the energies of patriotic Filipinos who want a better government and a better life for our people may be utilized more effectively.

Three major forces are acting in the political arena to protect or promote their interests in that post-Marcos future: first, Marcos and his administration; second, the US and its transnational corporations, Japan, West Germany etc. and their corporate investors in the Philippines, the WB-IMF and the Philippines' 483 bank creditors – in short the external forces; and third, the opposition which consists of the various opposition parties and a large number of cause-oriented groups from right to left.

CRISIS AND CREDIBILITY

For Marcos and his group, the best possible scenario would be to hold on until 1987, with health and position intact, retain his foreign support, control dissidence and discontent, regain some viability for the economy and some credibility for himself and maybe even run for another term. He may, with the latest medical technology, manage to postpone deterioration or a visit from the Grim Reaper, but the economy is something else.

Marcos' economic options are now seriously constricted by the debt crisis which has made the IMF and the creditor banks the arbiters of economic policy. Not only that, even before the debt crisis, his powers had already been progressively pared down by the technocrats who now occupy the most sensitive posts in his administration and who obviously have the backing of the US-WB-IMF combine. Despite the appearance of unlimited power, Marcos can hardly assert himself independently on major policy issues. In essence, his role has been reduced to that of a policeman, while

policy-making power in the decisive economic sphere has shifted to technocratic hands regarded as more reliable by the external forces.

It certainly does not look as if the economy will recover in the near future. The IMF stand-by agreement secured only after the Philippines had accepted such onerous conditions as a free float of the peso (read, devaluation), higher taxes for Filipinos and lower tariffs for imports, will surely exacerbate the problems of both the ordinary citizen and the Filipino businessman. Since the negotiations for a financial bail-out are premised on the continuation of the present WB-IMF-designed economic development program, the result can only be more of the same — more decapitalization and deeper poverty. Therefore Marcos cannot regain credibility. Without credibility, he cannot lead. This was the same predicament of President Quirino after the fraudulent elections of 1949.

SOURCES OF STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS

Marcos' fall-back option is to prepare, with foreign support, for a smooth turnover of the presidency in 1987 to a hand-picked candidate who will not rattle the skeletons of his predecessor. A graceful exit with substantial control over the immediate post-Marcos era is surely Marcos' long-term goal. But power is addictive and he may well try to postpone relinquishing it until it is too late, in which case he may suffer destabilization, or worse, from external forces for whom he will have become expendable, and he will not be able to control the transfer of power. The fate of South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem and South Korea's Park Chung Hee comes to mind. That would be the worst possible scenario for him.

Marcos' present source of strength is foreign support. It is also his source of weakness because he must barter the well-being of his people to maintain this support. The external forces will not stop extracting concessions from him for their economic and strategic interests. More privileges and tax exemptions for foreign corporations will surely allow them to further displace Filipino businessmen and drive many of them to bankruptcy. IMF-imposed policies for more taxes, increase in oil prices, higher rates for water and electricity consumption, deregulation of prices

of prime commodities, elimination of government subsidies for Filipino consumers, small farmers and businessmen, will surely create more hardship for all sectors of the population. This will drive more people to militant opposition, which in turn will force the administration to institute more and more repressive measures, commit more military atrocities and violate more human rights, which will surely further escalate dissent — a vicious cycle indeed from which Marcos will be unable to extricate himself.

THE EXTERNAL FORCES

What are the overall objectives of the external forces? Their paramount interest is the continuation of the present economic development program based on hospitality to foreign investments and export orientation. Without it, their operations would be jeopardized. Moreover, the strategic interest of the US as a world power demands not only that her military bases be kept secure by client governments but also that as many countries as possible remain within her orbit and open to her corporations.

Corollary local objectives are political stability and administrative efficiency in order to maximize these corporations' opportunities for investments and profits. The single-minded pursuit of these objectives is behind their seemingly contradictory attitude toward Marcos as most clearly exemplified by the actions of the United States and her businessmen.

When Marcos imposed martial law, he received support and approval from the United States which had been increasingly worried about the strong nationalist currents in the Constitutional Convention and in the student demonstrations of the early seventies. Martial law temporarily silenced popular nationalist demands and thereafter produced a Constitution whose service contract provision opened to foreign investment many areas hitherto reserved for Filipinos.

No wonder the American Chamber of Commerce immediately sent Marcos a congratulatory telegram and the present Chamber president described Martial Law as a "Heaven-sent relief" and its lifting, "a cause of concern." Nothing proves more graphically the basic contradiction between Filipinos and foreign interests than the fact that their darkest hour should be a cause for rejoicing for foreign businessmen. They were right to rejoice,

of course, for it was easier for them to deal with only one man who could be offered support, tempted with loans, pressured by various threats, to issue the decrees they wanted.

Foreign satisfaction with Martial Law is reflected in the following statistics: whereas new US investment had gone down to \$16.3 million in the two years before Martial Law, total US investments which stood at \$113.8 million in 1973 increased nine-fold to \$920 million by 1981.

NORMALIZATION FOR CONTINUITY

Why then has the United States been pressuring Marcos during the past few years to dismantle Martial Law structures and hasten the process of normalization? Is it really, as publicly avowed, a concern for democracy? A review of the three major areas about which the United States has demonstrated her concern is instructive.

First, the problem of succession which has been solved by the reinstitution of the position of vice-president. Foreign states and their corporations would not want to lose the privileges they have extracted from an acquiescent President; they would not want to see a sudden reversal of policies should the President die without a clearly designated successor. Foreign corporations do not want political surprises; they want to be assured that what they got from Marcos they will continue to have — hence the demand for a smooth transition.

Second, support for the May 14 parliamentary elections. The various messages to Marcos from American officials to insure "credible" elections sprang from the same desire to protect their interests. After getting what they wanted from an authoritarian regime, foreign states and foreign corporations had begun to fear that the opposition which had grown as a reaction to repression and a faltering economy and which had been shocked into open militance after the Aquino assassination might move rapidly leftward if its moderate elements were not accommodated and strengthened through credible elections. A sharpened nationalist sentiment among the citizenry could be a potential threat to their favored positions.

May 14 was seen as a safety valve for discontent, and moderate politicians as safe rallying points. As a matter of fact, in his own talks with U.S. State Department officials, Aquino himself had adverted to their fear of a Marcos vs. left polarization. He saw his role as an alternative center pole attracting support away from the two extremes. It would be useful for the US to have ready, moderate alternatives to take Marcos' place. US political strategists therefore increased their bridge-building activities with the opposition not only to identify their reserve forces but also to use these as a leverage against Marcos should he balk at granting their new demands.

LESSONS FROM IRAN

The imperialists have learned their lesson from Iran and Nicaragua. In the Philippines, they are not putting all their eggs in one basket. They alternately support and distance themselves from Marcos, preserving him as a momentary ally who may nevertheless be pushed aside if a viable alternative emerges in the highly fluid struggle for the top slots in the neo-colonial political hierarchy. At the same time, they are avidly and openly courting and aiding elements of the moderate opposition to whom they can always shift the full weight of their power when conditions are ripe enough for this. Likewise, given the sophistication of the imperialist machinery, both overt and covert, it is not far fetched to suspect that they may also have their contacts even among those who have adopted a "nationalist" stance in order to coopt at least part of the forces which would otherwise support truly anti-imperialist, mass-based groups. If this seems incredible, I would like to recall for you the words of George E. Taylor in his book, *The Philippines and the United States: Problems of Partnership* published in 1964. Taylor says: "It is wiser for the U.S. to anticipate and encourage change and to influence and guide it." Taking note of the growth of nationalism, Taylor advises that the United States take this development "very seriously" and guide it so that it does not take an anti-colonial, therefore anti-American direction.

CATERING TO WORLD OPINION

At the same time, the call for democratic reforms in client states is popular with American citizens who are embarrassed by their government's support for dictatorial regimes all over the world. By proposing democratic reforms, the US administration caters to its constituency, enhances its claims to be the champion of freedom and revives the old illusions of Filipinos about their erstwhile guardian.

Many Filipinos hope that the US will exert stronger pressure for real democratic reforms. These hopes are unfounded; the democratization external forces would be willing to sponsor is limited by the very interests of global capitalism. Instead of genuine democracy they urge only the trappings of democracy; for example, elections that limit the voters' selections between candidates of ruling groups. Real democracy would be frowned upon because to allow the popular forces a real voice in policy-making, and therefore real power to protect their own interests, would endanger foreign corporate interests. The only electoral exercise they favor is one with the semblance of popular approval so that it can defuse an explosive situation without endangering foreign investment. Such an electoral exercise should enhance political stability and insure continuity of policy, in their favor.

All this should not cause a knee-jerk reaction on our part and make us reject elections altogether just because the Americans favor them for their own ends. Rather, we should endeavor, through organized action, to make future elections serve us by transforming them into real democratic exercises through which the people's will can be expressed.

REASONS FOR FISCAL RESTRAINT

The third visible foreign concern is fiscal restraint and administrative efficiency. If only superficially understood, foreign pressures in this direction would be appreciated by Filipinos shocked by official extravagance, corruption, inefficiency and mismanagement. It is in the Filipinos' interest to have a frugal and efficient government, but foreign motivations

are different. They want a frugal and efficient government that will have enough revenues to pay its foreign debts and have enough dollars to sustain profit remittances and raw material importation for export-oriented industries.

Inevitably, the budget cuts that the IMF recommends reduce the services government provides for the Filipino people and the subsidies it grants to the low income consumers, so that money saved can be used not only to pay debts but to finance the infrastructure facilities transnationals require. Revenue measures extract more taxes from Filipinos while foreign corporations enjoy their tax exemptions and tax holidays. Efficiency is measured by how expeditiously government offices can service the needs of the transnational giants.

TOWARDS RECOLONIZATION

Their actions and strategies are all directed at gaining more and more privileges under the present regime and preserving these if and when a new set of leaders comes to power.

Marcos has given them much but they want more. After Marcos allowed foreign banks to own up to 40% equity in local banks, they now want to open fully foreign-owned branches of their banks. They are not content with their present privileges and tax exemptions; they want to be able to own land or, failing this, to be allowed to lease land for 99 years. In short, the US is now pressuring the Philippines to grant her citizens national treatment — that is to say, to give Americans the same rights as Filipino citizens. This would amount to recolonization.

The external forces are very strong, particularly in the Philippines where they are dealing with a debt-ridden economy and an administration that has lost popular support. But their greed for power and profits is their fatal weakness. That greed causes them to finance repressive governments which give in to their demands at the cost of impoverishing the local population. Sooner or later, the people begin to realize that their oppression and their poverty benefit not only their local oppressor but the external forces that back him up. The people of Cuba and Vietnam, Iran and Nicaragua

learned this lesson.

To work for this broad understanding of the root causes of our poverty and oppression as a people should be the task of the opposition. This brings us to the third actor on the Philippine political stage.

THE CONVENTIONAL OPPPOSITION

The third actor on the political stage, the opposition, is characterized more by diversity than by unity. Its single common denominator is its anti-Marcos position which is shared by large numbers of the unorganized citizenry. This common denominator is what brought out the votes on May 14 and the crowds at hundreds of demonstrations and other public activities. As a sign of unity it is a source of strength, but a source of weakness, too, which both the administration and the external forces, the latter in particular, are trying to exploit.

Politicians who are now competing for the limelight are generally more concerned about the fulfillment of their ambitions than in the principled pursuit of whatever they conceive to be the national interest. A few of them manage to combine both ambition and principle rather adroitly but they are more the exception than the rule. The American-style, electoral system which many Filipino politicians regard as the hallmark of democracy has in the past been nothing more than a contest between the Ins and the Outs. Those out of power criticized the performance of those in office. They often made sweeping promises and presented radical solutions just to differentiate themselves from the incumbents. As an American governor-general once shrewdly observed: "The Ins are generally conservative, the Outs are always radical — until they get in. The Ins are conservative from conviction, the Outs are radical for convenience." While this is too sweeping an assessment, it is one worth remembering so that in the future the people may not be betrayed by their leaders as they have so often been in the past.

At the moment, Filipino politicians represent an ideological spectrum from right to left of center. Right may be defined as those essentially in favor of the neocolonial status quo, who want just a change of faces;

center as those who favor the same status quo as regards external forces but with emphasis on the return of the old democratic processes and civil liberties. Left may be defined loosely as referring to political leaders advocating an anti-IMF-WB, anti-US bases and anti-foreign domination stand, although of course there are many gradations within this category.

The strength of the politicians lies in their drawing power up to this time, in the apparently continuing adherence of majority of the population to the conventional electoral process. Ironically, this could be the same source of their weakness in the future as more citizens demand much more than the conventional electoral contests of the past with their emphasis on personalities, petty issues and bombastic speeches. If today's politicians do not change, they will surely be discarded in favor of new political groups that have definite programs, represent a definite constituency, and do painstaking, year-round grass-roots organizing and politicizing whether it be an election year or not.

Politicians in the Philippines have traditionally comported themselves in such a way as to deserve American patronage. This is particularly true for those with presidential ambitions. Confirmation of this fact comes from an unimpeachable source, former President Diosdado Macapagal who said in 1968:

Filipino incumbent Presidents and most Presidential candidates endeavor to obtain the support of the American government or at least not to antagonize it in their bid for the Presidency. This is significant on two counts. Firstly, it indicates that American authorities perform acts, overt or clandestine, calculated to bear on the actuations of incumbent Filipino Presidents and most Presidential candidates and to affect the campaign and its outcome. Secondly, this practice lessens the independence of mind and action of Filipino Presidents — a fact which could jeopardize the interests of the Filipino people.

The current presidential hopefuls are no exception. As mentioned earlier, the external forces are busy cultivating them. Embassy invitations where their malleability can be assessed in private dialogues are frequently extended.

THE BUSINESS OPPOSITION

A second opposition sector consists of businessmen who became active after the Aquino assassination which coincided with and hastened the deepening of the economic crisis.

Big businessmen and the middle-class followers they can muster, are expected to support whoever can assure a hospitable climate for private enterprise, whether foreign or local. Most businessmen are essentially pragmatic; they do not really care who is at the helm, as long as they can continue doing business. In fact, some were among the beneficiaries of martial rule which has kept the potentially antagonistic forces of labor in check through a doubly oppressive low-wage and no-strike policy.

Their high visibility at a time when the post-Aquino protest was at its peak coinciding with Marcos' ill health was obviously an effort to insure that they would be active participants in deciding the shape of the post-Marcos era. Like their foreign counterparts, their money talks for them whether it be in helping to finance protest actions or supporting this or that politician.

There are however businessmen who have shown a sincere concern for the loss of political and civil freedoms. They have actively participated in the discussion of basic issues and have involved themselves in the struggle for greater freedoms, justice and democracy.

Many professionals, the middle class sectors in general, have been alienated from the administration by rising prices, official corruption and extravagance, and their fear for their future within an economy in crisis. The Aquino assassination shocked them into active protest. Executives and employees of big businessmen who had begun expressing their opposition easily followed the latter's lead. This sector, with its material and intellectual resources, its creativity and relative leisure is an asset to the protest movement. On the other hand, its Western culture and consumption patterns and its economic status and employment may create an ambivalence toward basic nationalist issues.

The Catholic Church, which has lately taken on a more prominent political role, has conservative, moderate and progressive wings, but what

seems to be dominant is the center-right group which follows an attack-and-retreat policy vis-a-vis the Marcos administration. Their major focus has been on human rights. The defense of members of their flock who have become victims of injustice or oppression, particularly by the military has radicalized some sectors of the church. But while the hierarchy takes up the cudgels for its radical priests and nuns when they are in trouble with the military, pressures are also exerted by the conservative and centrist majority on its left sector to moderate their activities. Such posture is bound to increase with the Vatican's vigorous criticism of the Theology of Liberation and the Pope's strictures against political activity as exemplified by his censure of the four priests in the Nicaraguan government.

THE POPULAR FORCES

As the most exploited and oppressed classes of Philippine society, the workers and the peasants should be the backbone of a democratic, nationalist, anti-imperialist movement. Analysis cannot take anything for granted and must avoid idealization. It must be admitted that historical conditioning, the isolation and backwardness imposed by lack of education, minimal access to information, and poverty itself, the traditions of acceptance of their status and fatalistic resignation to their condition and, not the least, time and again the cooptation of their leaders — all these have undermined the strength of the potentially most vital and decisive sectors of the population. The recent mass actions are signs of the awakening and growing militancy of the working class. This involvement is giving them experience and has awakened their consciousness of their power potential.

Over the years, the left — that is to say, the nationalist, anti-imperialist forces — have endeavored to organize and politicize these all-important sectors of our society with varying degrees of success in different areas. Today, despite the potentials for expansion and consolidation offered by the present crisis, the left is hampered by constraints and biases both from government and various sectors of the opposition. Moreover, the various tendencies within the left tend to impede unity, and its relations with the anti-Marcos center-right forces are tenuous and problematic. Alliance with

these groups may give a momentary illusion of strength, but this may only favor those elements who, if they succeed in replacing Marcos, may solidify their relations with those vested groups who want a say in the determination of economic policies. Chances are that these two groups, along with the other "moderates," will find common ground in confronting the anti-imperialist forces and show their real colors when they attain power. These are the problems of United Front tactics under a regime which because of its excesses overshadows the basic issues. The various contradictions among opposition groups are presently subsumed under the pervasive anti-Marcos line.

The present weakness of its still growing base, its own internal problems, and the climate of hostility and prejudice it must contend with, makes the work of the nationalist anti-imperialist movement a difficult one in the short-run, although its efforts must be assessed in terms of long-term, local and international developments. Since it is this force alone that can confront imperialism and its current surrogate, the Marcos-Virata administration, we are regretfully forced to the conclusion that the Philippines will have more of the same, perhaps packaged in a new and more acceptable wrapping paper, in the immediate post-Marcos era.

Policies and programs emanating from the World Bank-IMF combine will continue under even more stringent conditions. Export orientation will remain the linchpin of neo-colonial industrialization. More Filipino-owned businesses will fold up as the multinationals increasingly take over and virtually denationalize the economy with the full use of the service-contract provision of the Constitution, the increasing accessibility of the national patrimony (including public lands) to foreign nationals, and the accelerating pace of rural penetration by international agribusiness concerns.

The Philippines continues to be plagued by a chronic balance of payments deficit. Since debt rescheduling and new loans are premised on a continuation of the policies which brought on the debt crisis in the first place, the "rescue" package can only mean that the Philippines will be digging itself into a deeper hole. The effects of devaluation and recession will be keenly felt, especially by the masses, in the next two years, which will most likely be characterized by unabated inflation, massive layoffs,

and ever widening immiseration. The cosmetic changes in the political sphere may spawn false illusions and expectations but after a short period these will evaporate and give way to another round, perhaps a convulsion, of widespread discontent.

LESSONS LEARNED

This prognosis may be painfully pessimistic in the short-run but it is resolutely optimistic for the long-term. The people's experiences with the Marcos era particularly with the present crisis have been teaching many Filipinos valuable lessons. The crisis has demonstrated how foreign capital behaves when faced with investment risks brought about by political turmoil. Dependence on foreign inputs and foreign funds made it clear to many that the policies that have been pursued are in the service of foreign capital. It has become obvious that flag independence has simply transformed a colony into a neocolony.

Today, the economic crisis has become the focal point of discussion. It occupies everyone's attention because the economy is in shambles and we face more and more severe dislocations with terrible effects on our people. It has become more and more obvious that economic rights cannot be divorced from political rights. And yet the debates on economic policy are too often still conducted within the very framework responsible for the present plight of the country.

BACK TO OPTIMISM

To place things in their proper perspective, economic rights must be viewed both within the national and international levels. On an international level, there is the economic right of countries to pursue their own policies based on the national interest. And the national interest must be based on the welfare of the vast majority. When the economic right is subsumed under the requirements of hegemonic economic powers, there is loss of economic independence. This loss produces policies that favor dominant

external powers to the detriment of the material life of the people of a dominated country. Thus they suffer more poverty. To contain the discontent arising from this condition, civil and political rights are restricted; individual human rights are violated. This is characteristic of a neocolony.

The continuing crisis will make the root cause of our national problems very clear — it is foreign domination. With Marcos out of the picture and the same problems still persisting, we can no longer blame him; therefore, more and more people will see foreign domination as the primary root and the Marcos regime's many excesses — corruption, mismanagement, extravagance, repression — will be correctly regarded as aggravating factors which are to a large extent also consequences of the kind of system installed by the external forces. It will also become crystal clear that only nationalism can animate our people to combat foreign domination and that only the nationalist, anti-imperialist forces have a concrete program for an independent Philippines based on justice for all and a freer, better life for our working people.

The outlines of that nationalist program would take three more afternoons to delineate and several decades to concretize — but they will be concretized and achieved in the long run. That is my optimistic forecast.

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